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Abstract

People like to think there will always be a little corner of themselves that will be secluded or that there's still an orange left at the bottom of the Christmas stocking. Some secrets can be corrosive and dangerous, but someone with no secrets is probably an impossibility.

MAUREEN CLARK

Unmasking Mudrooroo

People like to think there will always be a little corner of themselves that will be secluded or that there's still an orange left at the bottom of the Christmas stocking. Some secrets can be corrosive and dangerous, but someone with no secrets is probably an impossibility.

(Margaret Atwood)¹

Until the controversy surrounding his identity became widespread in 1996, the most durable dimension of Mudrooroo's public self was that of the Aboriginal author, academic and critic whose work represented a site of revelation of colonial duplicity. Acknowledged for over two decades as the arbitrator in matters of authentic Aboriginal writing, his was the voice of Indigenous Australia, both at home and abroad. Increasingly, however, there has been a shift in that perception. In recent times, the thrust of Mudrooroo's project has become less clear. A more sinister version of his story has emerged, one which portrays him as having knowingly constructed a false Indigenous heritage. It has become possible to regard Mudrooroo's work as the creation of a clever literary trickster who has written himself into a narrative of Aboriginal belonging that is as much a fabrication as the characters who inhabit the pages of his books. For it is now apparent that Mudrooroo does not belong to the Kickett family of Western Australia who are descended from the ancient Bibbulmun tribe, as he claimed. Rather, he is a non-Aboriginal man of mixed heritage whose ancestors are the Barrons, one of the first white families to arrive on the shores of Western Australia, in 1829.

Debates over the issues of authenticity and belonging are connected to a long history of discriminatory practices in Australia that persist in our time. Writing in a different but related context, Sneja Gunew suggests that the discourses circulating associated with predicaments such as Mudrooroo's represent examples of 'how a cluster of questions concerning authority linked with authenticity resonate within today's cultural politics: who has the right to speak, on behalf of whom' (Gunew 1993, 7).² Mudrooroo's dilemma is inextricably linked to his claim to authentic Indigenous ancestry, a subject position that has authorised him to speak for and on behalf of Australia's Aboriginal community. It is undeniable that Mudrooroo belongs to a discriminated-against minority in this country. His background as an institutionalised black man has clearly informed his works of fiction. However,

prior to the questioning of his Indigenous belonging, Mudrooroo was particularly dogmatic and exclusive in his views on who should or should not inhabit Aboriginal cultural space. This has meant that critics, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, are especially unforgiving for what they regard as a form of cross-cultural betrayal, one that fosters disunity and has ominous echoes of not only the native informant/collaborator but also of colonialism's restrictive, controlling practices.

The controversy surrounding Mudrooroo's alleged duplicity has emerged within the larger, unsettling experience of a growing number of Australian writers and artists whose claims to Aboriginal authenticity have been either questioned or found fraudulent. Among them is author Banumbir Wongar, known overseas as an Arnhem Land Aboriginal writer but who proved to be Streten Bozic, a Serbian immigrant to Australia. There is also the instance of the young, female Indigenous novelist Wanda Koolmatrjie who was unveiled as Leon Carmen, a middle-aged white male. Yet another is male Aboriginal artist, Eddie Burrup who was the imaginary creation, the brain-child if you will, of white female artist, the late Elizabeth Durack.³ However, Mudrooroo's case should not be confused by this widely published series of non-Aboriginal impostures. Nor does it fit neatly within the context of the latest charges brought, in particular, by activist Robert Eggington on behalf of the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation.⁴

The 1973 Federal Government regulation governing the definition of Aboriginality requires that the following conditions be met: one must be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; one must identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; and one must be identified by the community as being a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.⁵ Dumbartung's most recent challenges have been directed towards, among others, academic and writer, Dr. Roberta Sykes, as well as novelists Sally Morgan and Archie Weller, on the grounds that they do not meet the prerequisites of Australian Aboriginality, in all its diversity, either by genetic descent or way of life. These challenges are yet to be resolved.⁶

Unlike these challenges, speculation regarding Mudrooroo's heritage is not a recent phenomenon. As early as 1955, when as a youth he left the institution known as Clontarf Boys' Town, his dark appearance set him apart from white Australian culture. The authorities of the day considered whether he might be of Indian, Negro or part-Aboriginal descent, but were unable to resolve this issue.⁷ Since then he has undergone a number of transformations, identifying variously as Colin Johnson, bohemian beatnik, and as the Reverend S.A. Jivaka, Buddhist monk. He has also adopted several Aboriginal names which, arguably, have given an aura of authenticity to his work. From Colin Johnson he moved to Mudrooroo Narogin, then to Mudrooroo Nyoongah to arrive finally at Mudrooroo. And now, on their own initiatives, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike are engaging in an unprecedented level of debate over who 'this' Mudrooroo really is.

The Western Australian journalist, Victoria Laurie, brought the controversy surrounding Mudrooroo's identity out of the shadows in 1996 in her now infamous article, 'Identity Crisis'. Contrary to the widely held view that the public airing of Mudrooroo's dilemma was a direct result of non-Aboriginal intervention, it was a member of the Aboriginal community who first aroused Laurie's curiosity about the research being undertaken into the Johnson family's ancestry. It was only following this initial approach that the journalist moved to contact the researcher herself, Mudrooroo's older sister, Betty Polglaze. In 1992, the fruits of Polglaze's research up until that time culminated in her reunion with a 'lost' younger brother she had neither heard of nor seen for over forty years. And it was then, having been presented by his sister with a copy of a biological family tree going back five generations to the year 1829,⁸ Mudrooroo stated publicly that 'crucial aspects of his identity [were] hazy' and that he was 'not clear concerning his tribal connections' (Moran 9).

In the course of her investigations, Polglaze discovered that their white mother, Elizabeth Johnson (née Barron) was directly descended from early Irish settlers who arrived on the shores of Western Australia aboard the vessel, *Sulphur*, in 1829. Elizabeth died in Fremantle Hospital on September 15, 1989. She was 91 years of age. Their father, Thomas Creighton Patrick Johnson, on the other hand, was born in Sydney in 1874 to an Irish immigrant mother and an immigrant father of Black American descent.⁹ Thomas died in Narrogin on June 7, 1938, just two months and fourteen days before his son Colin was born.

It was apparent that Mudrooroo's claim to Aboriginal genealogy and a connection with the Kickett family was without substance. This fact was disclosed in a series of newspaper articles (including that of Victoria Laurie to which I refer earlier) published during 1996 and 1998.¹⁰ Although apparently unable to invalidate his sister's findings, Mudrooroo refused to accept that his mother was white and not, as he had claimed, an Aboriginal woman.

In view of this, following Aboriginal protocol, the Kickett family invited Mudrooroo to come forward to substantiate his claim to belonging to the Nyoongah people through a matrilineal link. This gracious and well meant invitation was neither acknowledged nor accepted. Therefore, following the dictates of Aboriginal tribal law,¹¹ representative elders made the following public statement on July 27, 1996:

the Kickett family rejects Colin Johnson's claim to his Aboriginality and any kinship ties to the families throughout the Narrogin and Cuballing region.

(Martin and Anthony 15)

In light of this, it is significant that Mudrooroo's friend and colleague, Gerhard Fischer subsequently observed that:

[g]iven the fact that Mudrooroo has not challenged his sister's findings in order to 'set the record straight', as he has been asked to do, it seems safe to assume that the basic facts of the family history of Mudrooroo as documented by his sister are correct. (96)

As noted, Mudrooroo's father died shortly before his son was born, in August 1938. As had been the case for his brothers and sisters before him, Mudrooroo's mother, who had once more fallen on hard times, delivered him at the age of nine into the care of welfare authorities. It was equally clear that, whilst Mudrooroo's background was one of institutionalisation, he was not a child of the 'stolen generation' as he had always maintained. Nevertheless, Fischer cites the author as saying in a 1990 interview with Liz Thompson:

I've always been aware of my black heritage. This awareness came from my mother: the Bibbulmun people are matrilineal so the female line is very very important to us. It was from my mother that I got most of my culture and also most of my complexes — one of the latter was not being white.... If you're an Aboriginal then you're discriminated against since the time you were born. This discrimination becomes part of the psyche ... Because of the policies at the time, you lived in terror of being taken away from your parents. This is exactly what happened to my brothers and sisters and eventually what happened to me. It's what we call the 'stolen generation'.

(Fischer 96)

As Fischer notes, despite the lack of a genealogical link, this statement clearly shows that there was no ambiguity in Mudrooroo's claim concerning Aboriginal ancestry through descent on his mother's side.

Mudrooroo's misplaced identification with an Aboriginal mother and a stolen generation is difficult for anyone to understand, particularly so for those who have lived through such a traumatic experience. The politically loaded words 'stolen generation' are used to describe part of a long term, systematic government plan to assimilate Australia's Indigenous people into the dominant white community. Part of that plan involved the forced removal of Indigenous infants and children from their homes and families and their subsequent incarceration in various welfare institutions in an attempt to 'rid' them of their Aboriginality — their language and culture. The words 'stolen generation' themselves are terrible and false when one stops to consider how many generations have had to survive the broad reach of their meaning. However, as Fischer speculates, it may have appeared a more psychologically tolerable option for Mudrooroo to claim he had been 'stolen' by government authorities than to outwardly acknowledge that, as a child, his white mother had given him away. Fischer sees Mudrooroo's fabrication of a stolen generation past as a 'defensive psychological strategy [which would] exonerate the memory of the mother and offer some kind of protection against the trauma of a childhood experience that would otherwise be very hard to bear' (Fischer 102). Sensitive though Fischer may be to his friend's plight, this is largely a matter of conjecture and Mudrooroo's childhood relationship with his mother remains unexplained and unresolved. That being said, it is difficult not to agree

with Fischer that an ongoing resentment towards his mother for abandoning him to the care of the Christian Brothers of Clontarf Boys' Town may account for Mudrooroo's negative attitude towards females in his fiction, literary criticism and cultural projects.

Unlike Mudrooroo's fiction, *Us Mob* (1995) is a socially and culturally specific project in which the author claims to voice the demands and views of Indigenous Australians. Referring to Vivienne Rae-Ellis's book, *Black Robinson*, Mudrooroo observes that 'there is a danger in using the [official] records of the past in that they may be complete fabrications, something which does not come to light without an extensive investigation and documentary analysis' (1995a 186). *Black Robinson* was first published in 1988 and is a controversial exposé of the crimes of George Augustus Robinson who held the post of Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people between the years 1829 to 1839.¹² Rae-Ellis unmasks Robinson as a cunning and deceitful betrayer of the people whom he was charged to protect. Drawing on the authority of Rae-Ellis's work, Mudrooroo states his opinion that the Indigenous people of Tasmania owe their survival to the nineteenth-century white seal hunters of Bass Strait. The author describes the sealers as 'the outcasts of colonial society, who enabled the Indigenous people to survive' and sees them as being wrongly criticised by some historians today (Mudrooroo 1995a, 187). Depicting the sealers' status as heroic, Mudrooroo excludes from his account the horrific plight of the Aboriginal women whom they not only raped and prostituted but also used for slave labour. Rae-Ellis observes that, during Robinson's Protectorate in 1835 the going price among the sealers for the acquisition of an Aboriginal woman was seven pounds fifteen shillings a head. As she writes:

each of the twenty-six sealers lived with two or three or more Aboriginal women, mostly from Van Diemen's Land and some had children by them, a number of whom were killed by their mothers. (Rae-Ellis 71)¹³

It is only following this alarming disclosure that Rae-Ellis goes on to say that the descendants of the surviving children of these unions became known as straitsmen or islanders and are now recognised officially as Tasmanian Aborigines.

Tendencies towards, at best, overlooking and, at worst, being dismissive of Aboriginal women's past suffering and their struggle to come to terms with what this means in the present are also evident in Mudrooroo's criticism of Sally Morgan. Morgan, who discovered her Aboriginality as an adult, has seen both her work and identity bear the brunt of Mudrooroo's harsh scrutiny and judgement. Writing in 1990, Mudrooroo described Morgan's first novel, *My Place*, in denigrating terms as 'a milepost in Aboriginal Literature in that it marks a stage when it is considered OK to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black' (1990 149). Ironically, this patronising representation echoes the late Dame Mary Durack's racially biased description of Mudrooroo in the foreword to his own first novel. In that foreword, Durack describes the budding author as a youth

who 'was a natural intellectual', who had 'an above average I.Q.' and who 'showed little obvious trace of native blood' (Mudrooroo 1995b, xvi, xvii).¹⁴

Whilst Mudrooroo later modified his criticism of Morgan, he continued to be dismissive of her work's relevance in the struggle to establish a place for Indigenous literature in Australia. In Mudrooroo's view, Morgan was less concerned with issues of political import to the Aboriginal community, than with her personal search for identity. He categorised her novel as a form of 'woman's work' interested more in her own life story than 'with the future aims and aspirations of the Indigenous people' as a whole (Mudrooroo 1997b, 16). For Mudrooroo, Morgan's work was a non-activist, apolitical form of literature bound up with a more general will to separate Australian culture from its British colonial heritage and dependency, rather than a site of Indigenous contestation. In his stated opinion, *My Place* was a settler, or

Australian text, romance, autobiography, or what you will. What Indigenality is in the text has come from a white readership who at last found an Indigenous text which did not shout at them and in fact mirrored their concerns as to their place in Australia.

(Mudrooroo 1997b, 195)

Although he was not the only critic to find fault with Morgan, Mudrooroo's attack was particularly severe, denouncing her as an 'outsider' and an 'inauthentic' Indigenous writer in a way that denied the diversity and ever-changing nature of Aboriginal belonging. Some time later, Mudrooroo condescendingly stated that he considered Morgan's book to be a 'well-written and edited' life-story (Mudrooroo 1997b, 194). Nevertheless, he simultaneously reaffirmed his view that she was 'not an Indigenous person writing about her community from a position of knowledge, but an outsider discovering that culture and an identity' (Mudrooroo 1997a, 195).

This form of criticism fractured and diluted the identity of an Aboriginal literary movement whose legitimation, development and best interests Mudrooroo claimed to support. In attacking Morgan in this way, Mudrooroo engaged in a politics of contestation and difference that contradicted the lessons of his own literary project in its refusal to accept the colonising view of 'authentic' Aboriginal culture as something static, traditional and incapable of positive response to social change. Coupled with the large measure of authority he then held in relation to Indigenous literature, Mudrooroo's criticism of Morgan spoke of cultural determinism and the coloniser's wont to treat Aboriginal people as outsiders who did not belong in their own country. Conversely, when he referred to the merits of his own writing, Mudrooroo asserted that, unlike Morgan, most of his work was produced from the inside looking out, rather than from the outside looking in. This being so, he suggested that he therefore had no need to establish his Aboriginality through genealogy or any other means (O'Connor 24). Put another way, without stating precisely what he meant by 'Aboriginal writing', Mudrooroo claimed that his

work alone was sufficiently Aboriginal to prove the authenticity of his Indigenous belonging. This self-centred image of the meaning of Aboriginality drew specifically on Mudrooroo's professional standing and sought to preserve his own privileged position as the voice of Aboriginal Australian literature. It was an assertion that both denied the validity of diverse textual representations of Aboriginal life and culture, and took no account of whether Mudrooroo himself held validated authorisation to speak on behalf of the people he claimed to represent. Arrogant and lacking in substance, it is not unreasonable to suggest that his attack on Morgan compounded, if not led to, the challenge to Mudrooroo's claim to Aboriginal heritage.

As mentioned earlier, Mudrooroo's sister traced the Johnson family back to the year 1829 through five generations on her mother's side to show that the Johnson children are directly descended from the first white child born on the shores of the Swan River colony of Western Australia. In Polglaze's view, Mudrooroo's refusal to accept the legitimacy of her findings is a rejection not only of the memory of his mother, but also of the truth of his family history and background. Ironically, Mudrooroo's rejection of his biological family has uncovered an area where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike share substantive agreement on fundamental human values. By distancing himself from the newfound relationship with his 'natural' brothers and sisters, Mudrooroo has also distanced himself from the Aboriginal community for, as Fischer observes:

[t]he tracing of their family histories is of particular importance today to the many Aborigines who were taken away as children and who are searching to re-establish lost family and community links. The writer's reluctance to recognise his own 'natural family' is thus met with little sympathy and understanding by many Aborigines. (97)

Mudrooroo has since admitted that some self-examination was necessary for him 'when in 1996, it was declared that he was of Negro ancestry, thus negating thirty years of being an Aborigine' (1997a 263). What transpired was the proposition that, according to his way of seeing, identity was self-made and performative rather than bound to a sense of belonging. As he writes:

all in all, the crossblood exists at the edges of identity and his identity is always open to doubt. He is the existentialist par excellence, resting his authenticity on doing rather than being.

[...] Australia was multicultural and the world was postmodern. A fixed identity really did not exist for writers such as myself who, every day, were creating identities in language. (1997a 263)

The author goes on to say that he felt he had done his part and was no longer deeply implicated in the Aboriginal cause. Now that 'native title [had] been established in law, there was really nothing left to fight for, especially when he [did] not intend to pursue an Aboriginal identity merely for the sake of claiming a piece of land' (Mudrooroo 1997a, 264). This statement speaks self-consciously

of the collapse of the will to further develop a relationship with a community in which the author no longer had a legitimate voice. It also suggests a fickle disregard for the land which, previously, he had defined as fundamental to Aboriginal life, its 'patterns of survival and, above all, its identity' (Mudrooroo 1995a, 209). The author's evaluation of his position became a work of retrieval, one that led to the decision to take up a new form of cultural identity. Mudrooroo now regarded himself as 'having become a new person, belonging to a new group which came into genetic being with the arrival of the first Europeans and the coming to birth of their offspring' (1997a 264).

Mudrooroo's notion that the self can be reborn with the practised ease of a magician's sleight of hand is illusionary and full of tension. This is a quasi-existentialist view of life that belongs in the performative realm of ambiguity and uncertain identification, the imaginary domain of the trickster. Identities do change, but they do so grounded in the memory and understanding of the perception of the self that has gone before. As Mudrooroo himself asserts, 'the past is there to be used — built upon' (1997b 23). The author's resort to a discourse of mutability, or to a notion of postmodern instability, potentially negates everything that supposedly gave meaning to his life as it had been prior to the questioning of his Aboriginality. It also implies that a person's identity is a form of self-ownership that can be changed at will; that it can travel unrecognised from one social identity to another without reference either to personal history or to the communal nature of the self.

Eminent Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has suggested that human life is fundamentally dialogical in character. Any attempt at self-examination must also be dialogic and involve discursive interchange with others. In Taylor's view, modes of identity formation that opt for self-fulfilment without regard to the demands of one's ties with others is antithetical to any strong commitment to community. Moreover, he observes that once those 'that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our [life] projects' (Taylor 5). This begs the question of whether or not Mudrooroo's choice to identify as an Aboriginal ever meant more to him than a way of gaining access to a site from which to excavate valuable textual material for his works of fiction. Or whether this most recent re-packaging of his identity is an inevitable and convenient way for him to 'save face' in the context of a radical re-positioning which, conceivably, is unwanted from his perspective.

Mudrooroo has pointed to the late Dame Mary Durack's 1965 foreword to his first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, as the racist source of what he calls his textualisation as a crossblood Aboriginal. Given his most recent comments in this respect, it is conceivable that the construction of the narrative of the author's Aboriginal belonging may have had its beginnings as early as the 1960s. He writes:

Having been textualised by a white person, having been officially designated the native, in other words, I had to go along with that, though in a different climate I might have claimed my Irish ancestry and, by doing so, Irish culture [...] But racism intruded in denying me this identity. It was denied to me by members of the dominant culture, such as Mary Durack. (Mudrooroo 1997a, 263)

By his own admission, however, Mudrooroo engaged 'in a politics of the body' (1997a 259) when negotiating his Aboriginal identity in dialogue with Durack. This may be explained as the inevitable outcome of dominant and dominated positions within a crude, dichotomous racist structure in which, ultimately, those who are neither black nor white must choose between two sides. The paradox of such a 'choice' is that those who are recognised as neither the one nor the other have no alternative but to elect which side of the racial divide they will stand, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. To borrow Adorno's words, 'in [such] a state of unfreedom, no-one, of course, has a liberated consciousness' (1973 95). And, of course, Mudrooroo's particular 'state of unfreedom' required his entry into a discourse that recognised him only in terms of its own notion of what it meant to be an Aboriginal Australian, one based on the colour of his skin.

Is it plausible, however, that some inverse racist judgement on his own account was necessary to enable Mudrooroo to set about building the framework for the achievement of his goal to become an Aboriginal author of fiction, rather than an Irish author of fiction? If we are to believe him, Mudrooroo's adoption of the dominant rules of recognition excluded any personal evaluation or judgement of Durack's assessment of who or what he was. But if this were so, it must follow that the author was prepared to accept Durack's pre-judged image of him as an Aboriginal and, at least to some extent, to reproduce the colonial values and ideology in which both were ensnared. There could have been little gain to be had from being identified as an Aboriginal in 1965, a time when Indigenous Australians were not even recognised as citizens under the law. But, unlike today, it was also a time when calling yourself an Aboriginal meant you would be accepted as one. The displaced nature of Mudrooroo's hybrid self meant that he belonged 'nowhere', his values and priorities informed by a sense of total exclusion. An assumed Aboriginal 'authenticity' would not only provide him with a platform from which to express a particular literary mode of protestation, potentially it would also release him from the homelessness of the in-between social space he then occupied. It is not unreasonable to suggest that, during this complex dialogic process, willingly or not, Mudrooroo determined to become not just another mixed heritage writer, but the first Australian Aboriginal novelist.

Mudrooroo was never alone in the formulation of his Aboriginal identity, and, given the cultural politics of the day, Mary Durack had no reason to inquire about the truth of his claim to Aboriginal belonging. The background details for the foreword to his first novel defined the budding author in a way that determined his forebears as members of the Bibbulmun tribe 'which, in 1829, had welcomed

the first white settlers as the spirits of their dead returned' (Mudrooroo 1995b, xiii). The foreword is saturated with the unquestioned racial prejudices of Durack's time. Nevertheless, it has been retained, in full, in succeeding reprints of *Wild Cat Falling*. This has meant that the 'original' version of Mudrooroo's story has survived. Mudrooroo himself holds the copyright to his novel and with every reprint of the novel — and there have been fifteen of these over the years — the author has, in effect, consistently reasserted and reiterated his claim to ancestral tribal connections. And, whilst the 1992, 1993, 1994 (twice) and 1995 reprints are prefaced with an introduction by Stephen Muecke, Durack's foreword has also remained.

There is a further connection that might shed some light on the complexities of Mudrooroo's racialised Aboriginal identity, one which may be found in his preoccupation with the historical figure of George Augustus Robinson. Whilst not obvious at first glance, Mudrooroo's fascination with Robinson and his treacherous practices has been career-long. The author's particular interest in the life of 'the first' white man to be appointed to the position of Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people began with *Wild Cat Falling*. As I have written elsewhere,¹⁵ the name Robinson appears originally in the author's first novel as that of a character who is portrayed as the unnamed protagonist's probation officer. Finding himself in court on a charge of car stealing, the unnamed hero says, 'that fat old square Robinson's turned up again. Thought he'd be content with the statement, but no, here he is in court. Dear old guardian angel probation officer' (*Wild Cat Falling* 99).

The story subsequently shows 'this' Robinson to be a pretender who betrays the part-Aboriginal character he is charged to protect. Reincarnations of the Robinson character (or members of his fictional family) rematerialise in *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), *Doin Wildcat* (1988), *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991), *The Undying* (1998) *Underground* (1999) and *The Promised Land* (2000). Known variously, and with deliberate, evaluative intonation as 'Fader', 'Meeter Ro-bin-nun', 'Ballawine' (red ochre), 'Commandant', 'Conciliator' and 'Protector', he is present in all of these books.

In *Doctor Wooreddy*, for example, Mudrooroo makes a complete parody of the 'real' George Augustus Robinson's widely accepted 'official' accounts of the 'civilising' mission of the Indigenous people of Tasmania. The spectre of history's Robinson then 'reappears' in each of the four volumes of the *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series. In the first of these, Robinson is re-born as Fada, a Christian Missionary who has started his life as a bricklayer, but was 'well on the way to achieving his ambition to become a member of the [Royal Anthropological Society]' (Mudrooroo 1991, 18). In the second, characters are named after him. As one comments:

Well, my name is George. I was named after a mad king and my elder brother, Augustus, was named after an insane emperor and also after the ghost¹⁶ Fada who ruled over us on that island, ever imprisoning us in the words he drew on paper.

(Mudrooroo 1998, 4)

The third book of the series, *Underground*, sees Robinson return once more as the treacherous 'Fada'. Spoken of in past tense, one character describes him in duplicitous terms as:

the bloke who one day arrived on our southern island with a mission to save us from devils such as himself. He saved us all right. He got us together in a God-forsaken bit of rock where we quickly began to pine away. We blamed it on evil spirits who had been waiting for this opportunity to get us and so did Fada. (Mudrooroo 1999, 8)

The *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series culminates in Mudrooroo's last published novel, *The Promised Land*, where we encounter Robinson yet again as the character Sir George Augustus, portrayed as, 'one of those self-made knights who, in the Reform Act of 1832, had risen from the enfranchised lower classes, though he had yet to create a suitably noble genealogy to go with his advancement' (Mudrooroo 2000, 10–11).

It is quite uncanny that all of the above characteristics apply just as equally to Robinson the 'real' man of historical narration as they do to Robinson the fictional character. Moreover, both in life and in fiction, Robinson adds an intriguing dimension to the shape of Mudrooroo's narrative to the extent that the author could arguably be said to have moulded his persona around that of the man who has provided so much material for his writing. To tease out some of the more sinister parallels, it may be useful to consider Robinson's story in brief.

Robinson arrived in Hobart on January 20, 1824 aboard the vessel, *Triton*. It was not until March 1829 however, that he was first appointed to the government post of Conciliator and Protector of Aborigines. Like Mudrooroo, Robinson was an avid reader, a man too who wrote 'creatively' and who had great faith in the power of the written word. In her book, *Black Robinson*, Vivienne Rae-Ellis suggests that conciliation was a field which George Augustus Robinson found richly rewarding, owing mainly to the gradual elimination of his competitors by various means. Being in a position of authority allowed Robinson not only to discredit his peers, but also to assume the right to speak for and on behalf of the Aboriginal people. It is no secret that Mudrooroo has also held a position of authority both in his academic and writing careers, speaking as and for Indigenous writers as well as the Aboriginal people generally.

One of Robinson's most consistent claims was that he had an insider's knowledge of Aboriginal life which far exceeded that of white outsiders who, in his view, failed to recognise the vast difference between the two cultures. (Once more, this is a claim that echoes Mudrooroo's interest in preserving his own status as the custodial voice of Indigenous Australian literature.) Robinson had an aptitude

for languages and his ever-growing mastery of Aboriginal vocabulary gave him an immense advantage over his rivals. Acceptance of Robinson's communication skills and Aboriginal cultural knowledge by colonial officialdom, and in particular by Lieutenant Governor Sir George Arthur, gave the pretender his authority to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal people. Ironically, it also provided the means of betraying them. Echoing a particularly difficult time in Mudrooroo's own life, Rae-Ellis writes of Robinson:

the only pleasure he extracted from his dismal situation on Flinders Island was the infinite time he had to read and write. He read as widely as his small library would allow, making notes on the meanings of unfamiliar words, continuing the process of self-education he carried on throughout his life. (Rae-Ellis 123)

The parallels that can be drawn between the worlds of these two men of words are remarkably self-evident. The question we need to ask here, is whether or not, like Robinson, Mudrooroo is similarly guilty of an act of imposture, however well meant it may have been.

Three significant 'relationships' have strongly influenced the Mudrooroo narrative. The first is George Augustus Robinson. The second is the late Dame Mary Durack, and the third is his sister, Betty Polglaze. And there is a (perhaps coincidental) thread that connects them all.

In the process of her research into her family history, Betty Polglaze made an odd and ironic discovery. She found that she, Colin and the other Johnson children whose mother was Elizabeth Johnson (née Barron) are direct descendants of the first white woman to give birth to a child on the shores of the Swan River Colony, in 1829. Even more uncanny, is that in Mary Durack's foreword to *Wild Cat Falling*, 1829 is the year in which Mudrooroo's claimed that his alleged forebears, the great Bibbulmun tribe of Australia's west coast, 'welcomed the first white settlers as the spirits of their dead returned' (Mudrooroo 1995b, xiv). Stranger still is that, whilst George Augustus Robinson lived in the new colony between 1824 and 1849, it was not until 1829 that he was appointed as the first Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people. Just fragments of information regarding Robinson's first five years in the colony remain (Rae-Ellis 19). At thirty-eight years of age, 1829 was a turning point in his life. It was the year in which the story of his exploits involving the Tasmanian Aborigines and the making of his personal fortune began. Arguably, the fact that the details of Robinson's shameful (his)story live on is due in no small way to Mudrooroo's fixation with the character, in his fiction.

However we may view its extraordinary recurrence, 1829 is a year that plays a significant role in the making and unmasking of Mudrooroo's Aboriginal identity. It is the year that connects the author's biological family history to his claim to belonging to the Bibbulmun tribe — to Mary Durack's foreword in *Wild Cat Falling* — and to the intense interest he has shown throughout his writing career

in the life of the betrayer of the Aboriginal people, George Augustus Robinson. And, as shown above, it is also a year of great significance in the life of Robinson himself.

NOTES

- ¹ Margaret Atwood, commenting on her novel, *The Blind Assassin*, is so quoted in an interview published in the March 3-4, 2001 edition of *The Weekend Australian Review*, R4.
- ² Gunew's comments refer to a similar controversy surrounding the revelation in the early 1980s that Aboriginal writer, B. Wongar, is also Streten Bozic, a Serbian immigrant. Born of a Yugoslavian father, Bozic is uncertain of exactly where he was born or who his mother was. He immigrated to Australia in 1960 and spent ten years living with Aboriginal tribes in the Northern Territory.
- ³ It is interesting to note that the cover of the 1995 edition of *Wild Cat Falling* is illustrated by the late Elizabeth Durack. Elizabeth's sister is the late Dame Mary Durack who was the author of the (in)famous introduction to that novel.
- ⁴ It was Robert Eggington who debunked the claims of US author Marlow Morgan's 'non-fiction' book, *Mutant Message Downunder*, in which she wrote of having undergone a spiritual transformation whilst crossing the Australian desert with a tribe of traditional Aborigines. And, ironically, the site now occupied by the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation was previously the Catholic institution known as Clontarf Boys' Town where, from 1947 to 1955, Mudrooroo spent eight years of his life in the care of the Christian Brothers.
- ⁵ Eleanor Bourke, Director, Aboriginal Research Institute, Faculty of Aboriginal and Islander Studies, University of South Australia. 'The First Australians: Kinship, Family and Identity'.
- ⁶ I have compiled this summary from articles appearing in *The Sydney Morning Herald* between Friday March 14, 1997 to Saturday December 20, 1997 with particular reference to Richard Guilliat's 'Black, White & Grey All Over'.
- ⁷ The confusion about Mudrooroo's origins prompted a diligent clerk in 1955 to instigate a search of Department of Native Affairs files. The search revealed that Mudrooroo was not known to the DNA and they were unable to confirm that he was an Aboriginal.
- ⁸ This statement follows both verbal and written communication with Mudrooroo's elder sister, Betty Polglaze, to whom I am greatly indebted. The assistance she has given to me in the course of my ongoing research has been invaluable. Mrs Polglaze has provided me with copies of documentation relating to the Johnson family heritage including a copy of the family tree. All such documents have been certified as 'authentic' by the Western Australian Genealogical Society Inc. On July 19, 1996, the Society formally recognised Rebecca Elizabeth Polglaze and the members of her biological family as direct descendants of Edward and Jane Barron who arrived in Australia on the ship 'HMAS Sulphur' on June 8th, 1829.
- ⁹ The Johnson children's paternal grandfather, Thomas Creighton Johnson was an African-American who emigrated to Australia from North Carolina in 1860. Thomas, died in 1880 at the age of forty-eight having spent seventeen years in 'the Colony of Victoria'. His death certificate states his place of birth as North Carolina, U.S.A. His son, Thomas Creighton Patrick Johnson, was twice married. Born in Sydney in 1874, he died in Narrogin in 1938 and, among others, is Betty's (and Mudrooroo's) father.

- ¹⁰ See for example, Roger Martin and Shaun Anthony, 'Family Adds Fuel to Literary Fire'; Amanda Mead, 'Novelist Defends His Black Identity'; Paul Lloyd, 'Between the Lines'; Terry O'Connor, 'A Question of Race'.
- ¹¹ A meeting was held at the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia on June 26, 1996 to discuss the questions surrounding Colin Johnson's Aboriginality. The meeting was attended by representatives of both families as well as members of the literary and academic communities. Following Aboriginal protocol, the meeting resolved to invite Colin Johnson to attend a subsequent meeting to provide his side of the argument.
- ¹² Mudrooroo's novel, *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), is a parody of the life and times (crimes) of the same George Augustus Robinson.
- ¹³ Rae-Ellis accounts for this as being due partly to the intense shame suffered by the women in giving birth to offspring of white men, and to a wish that their children not live to suffer a fate similar to their own.
- ¹⁴ Mudrooroo, *Wild Cat Falling*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1995b (first published 1965). Future references to the novel are from this edition.
- ¹⁵ Maureen Clarke, 'Reality Rights in the Wildcat Trilogy', *Mongrel Signatures*, ed. Annalisa Oboe, Rodopi, Italy. Forthcoming in 2002.
- ¹⁶ In Mudrooroo's discourse the word 'ghost' represents European people of white skin.

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